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ABSTRACT

Designed to assist educators in the development of reentry programs for adult learners, this guide provides information on the creation, operations, and outcomes of Project Chance, a reentry program initiated at Brooklyn College during the 1970's to serve ethnically diverse, lower and middle income women from the Brooklyn community. A foreward to the guide highlights the staff's willingness to consider participants' needs and reactions in modifying the content and approach of the program. Following an introduction to the outcomes of the course from its inception in 1976 to its discontinuation in 1980, the guide discusses: (1) one of the major program components--a pre-college, reentry course designed to enable women to explore options, build basic skills competency, and gain self-confidence; (2) redefining the goals of the reentry curriculum based on the first year's evaluation; (3) revising the curriculum to strengthen the basic skills component; (4) the mathematics skills component; (5) the language arts curriculum; (6) the life planning skills curriculum, which emphasizes self-awareness, self-evaluation, decision-making skills, and the ability to describe probable future situations; (7) support services and counseling; and (8) providing information about other programs and services. For each topic, information on special problems, barriers, and solutions is provided. (EJV)

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A REENTRY CURRICULUM GUIDE FOR THE ADULT LEARNER

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JC 850 491

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FOREWORD

I have been asked to write a foreword to this Reentry Curriculum Guide on the basis of my being an outsider who is also knowledgeable about the Project, having previously served as a research consultant to Project Chance. The most impressive aspect of the Project, and this, I think, emerges from the description of the development of the reentry curriculum, was the willingness of the Director and staff to change the game plan as they went along. To do this they had to see some of their cherished assumptions overturned.

The reentry course as originally conceived could be called a typical product of the 1970's: it was dedicated to feminism, participatory democracy in the classroom, psychological openness and self-revelation to one's peers, and to community involvement -- a litany of liberal middle-class values. The professionals who staffed Project Chance and formulated its methods and principles of operation did not foresee that the participants would, for the most part, reject cultural feminism, while struggling for greater autonomy; would use their vote in the classroom to put the teacher firmly back in control of the educational process; would espouse the value of privacy over and against that of openness, while enthusiastically embracing self-revelatory processes which did not threaten that privacy; would for the most part reject the community sites for college classes in favor of travelling to the college proper as a way of marking the entry into a new status, with a new set of survival skills embedded in a new subculture -- one in many ways incompatible with their community mores and way of life: and would value instrumental education involving specific and technical skills acquisition over teaching geared towards larger, broader objectives involving changes in perception and understanding. I want to particularly underscore this last point. The goal of liberal professional educators is most often for their working class or impoverished "disadvantaged" students to cross the "great divide" of class, psychologically and culturally, to acquire a shared outlook with those who have been raised by college educated parents in relatively comfortable surroundings and whose experience of family, friendship, success, leisure and the realm of sacrosanct value is vastly different from those with blue collar backgrounds -- which again is vastly different from those with impoverished, "welfare" backgrounds -- no matter what their ethnic group. In espousing the student's acquisition of a new culture, and the attainment of bi-culturalism, they ignore the harshest reality faced by the students: the drop-out rate, the failure rate, among educationally disadvantaged students is phenomenally high. All of their energies must be bent towards survival -- not in any long term sense but in passing this semesters' courses. To that end, reading, writing, and math skills assume the highest priority.

In spite of that fact, the students will inevitably make cultural adaptations to the extent that they encounter a different set of values embodied in the curriculum and to the extent that they come into closer contact with others whose backgrounds differ from their own. Fortunately, though, Project Chance never lost sight of the fact that its overriding purpose was not to "teach values" but to give support -- academic, vocational, and personal -- and when the students challenged the staff's concept of what, concretely, giving support meant, they found a receptive and energetic response. The staff, however, did not uncritically take at face value every reaction of the participants. For example, although the students were correct in perceiving that the acquisition

of basic skills was their most important bulwark against academic defeat, the Project staff was aware of the fact that it was the personal psychological resources of the student which was often the decisive factor in determining who succeeded in the program and who didn't. The staff was faced with the challenge of helping students to overcome deeply ingrained patterns of passivity based on feelings of inferiority -- feelings which were often denied -- and a survival strategy appropriate to other circumstances.

It is to the great credit of the Project Chance staff that they listened to the participants in their Project. The description of the development of a Reentry Curriculum Guide For Adult Learners is testimony to that responsiveness in making changes in the curriculum based on the participants' perceptions of their own needs and their expressed desire for changes in the program.

Another point on which I would like to comment is that Project Chance after initially sponsoring college entry for participants on an open admissions basis with no cut-off point on the basis of reading and math scores, changed its policy and referred the lowest scoring applicants to other programs that could more appropriately meet their needs. There are many critics of this policy, many who believe that everyone has the right to attend college and that it is the duty of college programs to offer sufficient remediation to make this policy practicable, or failing that, to at least accept the lowest scoring students and offer them the chance to "make it" with the same level of support offered to higher scoring remedial students. It is this kind of idealism that is responsible for much of the cynicism and odor of defeat which surrounds the open admissions programs in higher education and which has contributed to the retrenchment of special support services and remedial programs for the non-traditional college student in recent years. When entrance to college comes to be seen as a right regardless of academic attainment, and when that right gets translated, in the vast majority of cases, in to the right to fail, none are served but the forces of despair and reaction in regard to the "uneducable classes." The most progressive educators in the most progressive institutions of higher learning are presently engaged in a battle for realistic admissions standards based on the colleges' level of commitment to remedial and other support services and on the severity of the deficiency in the students' developmental skills. The truth is that there is a great pool of applicants -- far more than there are places for at present -- whose skills deficiences are only moderate, not severe, and who have a good chance of succeeding in college programs at the present level of support.

Viana Muller
Co-Coordinator
Women, Work and the Economy
June 26, 1980

PREFACE

Project Chance, the reentry program which forms the basis of this Guide, was established at Brooklyn College in 1976 under a three-year grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. The program survived the romantic assumptions of the original proposal and, through struggle and effort, went on to become an excellent reentry program for the population it was intended to serve: ethnically diverse, lower- and middle-income women from the heterogeneous Brooklyn community. The program succeeded in proving that providing access did not mean lowering standards, and that alternative models of education could be academically rigorous as well as supportive. Sadly, but perhaps typically, Project Chance's success coincided with its demise, for with the completion of the Guide, the program which is responsible for it has been discontinued at Brooklyn College for "budgetary considerations." However, we know the population we served is growing, and other programs will be established to serve them. Since it is our intention that this Guide be as useful to our colleagues as possible, we have been forthright about our errors, hoping to encourage others by our frank admission that we are less than perfect. We also hope the discussion of our trials, errors, and eventual successes will assist others to shorten the distance between those points. We do not claim to have solved all our problems, and expect others will improve on our model.

The Reentry Curriculum Guide for the Adult Learner reflects the contributions of many people who assisted Project Chance during its four years of existence. The Project attracted a dedicated staff, and I should like to thank Joan Sophie and Mary Wexford for their contributions to the counseling section of this Guide. The Project also attracted a group of gifted teachers for the reentry course, one of whom, Maritza Arrastia, assisted me in the initial stages of preparing this Guide. The Project participants who went on to Brooklyn College were fortunate in encountering a number of teachers who not only demanded excellence from the students, but convinced them they could achieve it; among these fine teachers, I would cite Vinnie D'Ambrosio and Naomi Halpern as the most outstanding. Within and without the college, the Project benefited from a circle of supporters, including the following people whose thoughtful evaluations of the Guide improved the final version: Dr. Bonne August of New York City Community College, Lotess Cright and Dr. Ruth Norman of Brooklyn College, and Penny Robiner of the Brooklyn Public Library. Finally, I want to thank the hundreds of Project Chance participants whose expressions of need, suggestions, and criticisms have contributed to the production of this Guide, and who, I know, would join me in paying tribute to one of the reentry participants, the late Dorothy Fitzgibbon, who was one of the most wise and generous women we have been privileged to know.

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INTRODUCTION

This guide emerges from the thought, work, and experience of the staff members of Project Chance, a program for reentering women established at Brooklyn College in 1976 under a three year grant from the Fund for the Improvement for Postsecondary Education, and with additional funding from the New York Community Trust. The original proposal envisioned a community-based, innovative educational program serving an ethnically diverse population of lower-income women contemplating a return to school or work. A major component of the program was a pre-college re-entry course designed to enable women to explore options, build basic skills competency, and gain self-confidence. A combination of grant support and college funding enabled the Project to offer six cycles of the re-entry course, consisting of 29 sections, serving 662 participants who attended classes either at Brooklyn College or at one of ten community sites in the borough. Two of the twenty-nine sections were modified to provide English-as-a-Second-Language instruction to a group of Hispanic women in Williamsburg and to a group of Russian immigrant women in Brighton Beach. The age of the participants generally ranged from the mid-twenties to the mid-thirties. The median income was under $10,000 per annum, and approximately 18% of the families earned less than $6,000 per year. In the initial stages of the program, 49% of the participants were White, 41% were Black, and 10% were Hispanic. The distribution of these constituencies shifted from one cycle to another, but remained, over all, close to the original pattern.

Although the original curriculum design had been drawn up after extensive consultation with representatives of community groups prior to the inception of the program, Project staff members discovered in the course of implementing the program, that the original design did not meet the needs of the population that the program was designed to serve. Through a continuous process of implementation, evaluation, and modification, the re-entry course emerged with its purpose, target population, and curriculum more clearly defined. When the grant support and college funding commitment ended, the course was not continued on a non-fee basis, and the Project's program design was modified. Participants were brought directly into the college and provided with an entry level core curriculum of English Composition, Basic Mathematics, and a Social Science sequence. The revised program was built upon the staff's experience with the re-entry course, and the principles of the program emerging from that experience are presented here in the hope they can be of assistance to administrators and teachers engaged in the process of developing similar programs.

THE REENTRY COURSE

The original reentry course enunciated a methodology for course development, reflecting a concept of education as a process of liberation rather than domination. The most important aspect of this curriculum was dialog within the community of women involved in the program as staff, students, and teachers, who, in the process of dialog, would become the subjects of their own study and build toward a liberation of all involved, whether as students or teachers. "The conventional hierarchy of teachers over students must give way," the curriculum guide warned, "to a process of education in which students and teachers understand themselves as 'co-investigators' of their experience."

The curriculum emphasized teaching materials developed by students, where the function of teachers was essentially to make available certain skills and resources which students could use or reject in order to create those instruments of study--tapes, videotapes, newsletters, for example--which reflect their needs and purposes. The curriculum guide suggested that the reentry teachers base classroom instruction on primary sources concerning the lives of women, such as brief autobiographical sketches and examples of art by women, such as contemporary songs and films, as well as raw data from government reports. These primary sources would enable the women to connect with, reflect upon, and draw conclusions about the content of their own lives; they would develop the skill of abstraction by engaging in the process rather than assimilating someone else's abstraction. A major area of exploration in the course was problems connected with going back to school; some principal concerns were how a woman's relationships with other people would be affected by her return to school, and what skills were necessary for successful work in school or jobs outside the home. Skills such as reading, report writing, note-taking and outlining, using the library, analyzing and abstracting would be developed within the context of the exploration of the problems. In addition to the readings that teachers and students were to prepare, a list of core readings, including selections from such works as Sisterhood is Powerful (New York: Vintage, 1970) and Studs Terkel's Working (New York: Avon, 1975), was included in the curriculum guide.

The first cycle of reentry courses, consisting of five sections of three hour classes held at three sites once a week for ten weeks, was conducted from November 1976 to February 1977. One hundred seven participants, recruited through advertisements or from meetings with community groups, enrolled in the course. The backgrounds of course participants were varied and so were their goals for the course. The course itself was loosely structured, designed primarily to provide a supportive atmosphere in which women could share experiences and explore possibilities for returning to school or paid employment. Confidence building, as well as information exchange and skills development, was a curricular goal.

After the classes ended, course evaluation forms were mailed with a covering letter and a stamped, addressed envelope to all participants in the reentry classes. Subsequent letters and telephone calls were made in an effort to increase the return of the course evaluations, but these efforts resulted in the return of only 39 of 107 forms.

> This situation proved to be a recurring one. Project staff consistently had difficulty obtaining information from participants, whether in the form of evaluation questionnaires or simple verbal feedback. We can only infer the causes of this low level of response. The population we served experienced low self-esteem as a constant condition in their lives. The reluctance to disclose their opinions and assessments may be due to a fear of giving the wrong answer, or giving a negative response that would make us "angry" with them. On the other hand, withholding information might simply have been a demonstration of power. A larger response might have been developed if a discussion of the importance of evaluation had been included in the orientation meeting held prior to the course. Participants might have been willing to provide honest evaluations if they understood their responses were an important part of program improvement.

Although 107 women enrolled for the classes, only 37 certificates of completion were awarded. An evaluation of the course revealed the attrition rate was due to a number of factors, including some over which the Project had no control. Changes in personal and family circumstances, such as marital separation, unemployment, return to work, or moving to a new home were, of course, beyond the Project's influence. However, other causes of attrition were areas of dissatisfaction which the Project could address. One major area of dissatisfaction centered around the expectations of the participants. Some women misunderstood the purpose of the course, and came because they thought or wanted to believe the course would provide specific skills such as typing; some women without high school diplomas thought it would be a high school equivalency course. Others expected a regular credited college course with a structured syllabus, and still others thought the course would determine their vocational aptitudes and help them get a job.

A second major area of dissatisfaction was course content. Both teachers and students expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of clarity and structure for the course. This dissatisfaction was due in part to lack of experience with the "co-investigator" concept of a class process, which was neither a traditional classroom situation nor an informal "rap-group" but something in between. On the whole, teachers seemed more comfortable with this arrangement than the students. However, the teachers had difficulty establishing a consistent classroom pattern because of the initial confusion about the purpose of the course.

The evaluation study showed the reentry course had achieved some significant successes. It had included women of diverse ages, income groups, and ethnic backgrounds. It had provided a supportive atmosphere for women who wanted to return to college, and it had helped others decide not to go. It had also

provided women who wanted to go to college with skills necessary for college work, although success in this area must be qualified by the lack of clarity over the definition of "skills." Participants seemed to define them quite narrowly, as, for example, the ability to divide fractions or to punctuate a sentence. Teachers and staff tended to define them more broadly, as, for example, increased fluency in written and verbal self-expression. Given the diversity of each class in terms of educational level, skills work of the narrow kind could not be taught effectively.

The evaluation study concluded with the following suggestions for changing the course:

1. The goals of the reentry course must be more clearly defined, and participants and teachers must be recruited on the basis of a clear understanding of what the course can realistically accomplish.

2. Class sessions and curriculum should be more specific and more structured, and more books and materials were needed.

3. Support services such as counseling and vocational information should be made available in a formal, but realistically usable way.

4. Information about other educational programs and services should be made available.

The rest of this curriculum guide deals with the modifications in the program that were made in an effort to conform to the findings of the First Year's Evaluation.

DEFINING THE GOALS OF THE REENTRY CURRICULUM

The experience of the first cycle clearly indicated that the goal of the reentry course had to be moved from a broad "explore your options" course to a course more narrowly defined as a preparation for return to school. This goal was emphasized in the literature publicizing the course and in orientation meetings. Nevertheless, Project staff discovered that the participants brought together in the agregate or responding to an announcement in a local newspaper continued to interpret the course in terms of their own needs and desires, and therefore continued to be disappointed. The original premise of the course was to provide access to higher education for people traditionally excluded from access to higher education. The course was grant supported and offered free to those who wished to take advantage of the opportunity. Unfortunately, however, the ease with which participants could enter the reentry course seemed to lower its value in their eyes. The continuing attrition was a source of frustration to the

teachers in the reentry course and the staff of the project, who were working very hard to develop a rigorous, sound alternative model of adult education. Because of the difficulty in getting evaluation questionnaires returned to us--either because participants did not mail them or had moved and not received them--follow up efforts to learn the causes of attrition were more often done by telephone, or even in chance encounters with participants who had dropped out of the course.

There was enough uniformity in these informal, unquantified responses to lead the Project staff to conclude the following factors must be considered in achieving a successful reentry program.

1. The more narrowly defined a program is, the more likely it is to achieve its goals. However, people with an array of great needs are not likely to be able to make effective use of the benefits provided by such a program. The distance between need and service cannot be adequately explained at a large orientation meeting at a community center. A one-to-one interview provides more opportunity for the program's design and purposes, to be fully explained, for questions to emerge and be answered, and for prospective participants to make a more informed, unambivalent decision to proceed with or withdraw from commitment to the program.

2. One of the sadder perceptions of Project staff was that middle class clients with greater self esteem often value services offered free of charge more than do lower income clients of low self esteem. Believing the latter group would value their time more if a price was placed upon it, Project staff recommended that a fee, scaled according to income, or a deposit, be imposed upon participants before entering the program. The deposit system, the Project's preferred method of strengthening commitment, would enable participants who had attended a required number of meetings with required promptness, to have their money returned to them.

3. The wide range of skills levels in the first reentry cycle presented lesson planning problems for teachers and frustration leading to attrition among participants. Beginning with the third cycle of the reentry classes, the Project staff decided to do pre and post testing in reading, with the aim of grouping classes homogeneously and measuring progress in the course. A reading test was given prior to the beginning of the reentry course, and participants were grouped with a measure of homogeneity; a reading grade on the Stanford Reading Test-Advanced (A) of 8.5 was the cut off point between groups. No one was ever excluded from participation in the course on the basis of reading score, but Project staff concluded that if

3. entry into college was a goal of participants, only those with a reading score of at least 8.5 could be substantially assisted in achieving that goal by the completion of the course. The anxiety participants experienced about testing was allayed by the explanation that the tests results enabled the Project staff to begin the course at their level of need. Moreover, the participants accepted the testing as a benchmark against which to measure their progress. (Post testing revealed that those who were regular in attendance generally achieved an improvement of at least 1.5 years in their reading scores.

4. The original proposal to New York Community Trust, which provided funds to pay an instructor in the reentry course, called for one teacher to be responsible for all instruction in the course. A Project director made a decision prior to the first reentry class to employ a number of teachers or "facilitators" to work in teams of two in each section of the reentry course, and be paid on an honorarium basis. Under this revised plan, one member of the "facilitator team" in each classroom was to be responsible for the counseling needs of the participants, and the other member of the team was to be responsible for the basic skills component of the reentry course. After each cycle of the reentry course, the Project staff would analyse the students' evaluations of the course and report the findings to the teachers, who were asked to implement the changes in the reentry course suggested by the findings. Since the reentry teachers were not an organic part of the Project, working with other members of the staff to implement the changes in program design, they did not have much motivation to carry out these changes, which came in the form of directions from administrators. Although the Project was fortunate in attracting a number of dedicated adjunct workers, their adjunct status inevitably caused alienation from the Project and from the reentry course. The fact that they were teaching at community sites, far from the college campus and the staff office, worsened the problem. Consequently, there was a tendency for many teachers to treat teaching the reentry course as "just another job" where one did what one was comfortable doing rather than follow guidelines one had had no part in setting down. We have come to believe the original plan of one or more teachers working full time as a member of the Project would have contributed significantly to the success of the course.

REVISING THE REENTRY CURRICULUM

The evaluation of the first cycle revealed the need for strengthening the basic skills component of the reentry course curriculum. In each cycle of the reentry course, Project staff met with the reentry teachers prior to the beginning of classes, halfway through, and at the end of the classes. At these meetings, the teachers were always encouraged to "do more math" or reading or writing. However, for some time no serious written revision of the original curriculum was undertaken, and teachers for the most part were left on their own to develop materials or to decide what texts to use in class. Feedback from participants in subsequent sections of the course indicated that they often felt there was too much "axe-grinding" in the reading selections chosen by teachers; occasionally women complained of too much emphasis on feminism; occasionally objections were made by both black and white participants that there was too much emphasis on race; and participants in one reentry section complained that participants in another reentry class were doing more academically rigorous work. Project staff came to believe that the occasional imbalance in classroom instruction and discussion would be lessened if curriculum guidelines were laid down more firmly. Finally, prior to the sixth cycle, the staff developed a formula for the reentry class whereby the teachers would spend one third of class time on language skills, one third time on arithmetic skills, and one third time on the life planning skills curriculum developed by the Project counseling team. This formula did not apply to ESL reentry sections, where the entire curriculum was devoted to language skills. In order to follow each class's progress, the teachers were asked to keep logs of the work in each area covered in class, with comments on problem areas. Specific language and arithmetic texts were recommended to the teachers, who were free to choose different texts if they were more comfortable with them. The texts selected were designed for self-instruction by adult learners, but reenforcement of textual material by the teachers was necessary for the texts to be effective. The Project found the most successful texts to be compact, comprehensive yet accessible, clearly written, occasionally humorous but not trite, and expressing confidence in the user's ability to master the subject. Our survey of texts revealed a number of suitable texts were available; since more such texts will no doubt be developed, we have no specific recommendations to make.

The life planning skills curriculum, however, was the Project's unique design; and while very much needed by the participants in the reentry course, was the curriculum area they most resisted. Women generally, and lower income women particularly, have inherited a baggage of low self esteem which includes a sense that barriers are impassable, and that they are powerless to make desired changes in their lives. Since this recognition is so painful, women may refuse to acknowledge the existence of obstacles. For example, they may assume a neighbor or relative will care for their children while they are in school without fully working out the child care arrangements with a specific neighbor or relative. They may assume bravado about opposition to their plans. The response, "I don't care what my husband says, I'm going back to school," does not take into account how much energy needed for study will be absorbed by conflict with a hostile partner. The Project staff believe life planning or life coping skills to be a necessary component in a reentry course, and opposition to this curriculum area can be countered in individual interviews prior to enrollment in the course.

MATHEMATICS SKILLS

This area of the reentry curriculum is more accurately described as "arithmetic" rather than "mathematics" because, in the Project's experience, participants in the reentry course needed to begin with the very basics: addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. This situation prevailed even when students' reading scores were high. Anxiety among the participants about mathematics was intense, although they recognized this section of the curriculum as their greatest area of need. In retrospection, the Project staff came to believe that making use of selections from the literature of learning, from Sheila Tobias' Overcoming Math Anxiety (New York: Norton, 1978), for example, might have assisted participants to become more comfortable with the subject. With respect to the mathematics textbook, we believe that no matter how basic, the textbook work must be reenforced by application of mathem tics skills to problems from everyday life. A typical exercise would be for students to work through a supermarket price list of products of different sizes, and, by using a unit price index, find the most economical size of a product. In another exercise, students could be asked to bring in a favorite recipe to share with the class; doubling or halving the recipe would involve the use of multiplication and division, and could form the basis of an introduction to fractions. In an extension of this exercise, students could compute the cost of each item in the recipe, total the costs, and then divide the total by the number of servings in the recipe, with recognition given to the student who had produced the most economical recipe.

A creative teacher can provide numerous variations of these life-related mathematics problems: how many gallons of paint are needed when the wall space of a room to be painted and the wall space coverage of a gallon of paint are given, or how many yards of fabric of a given width are necessary to make curtains for a window of given dimensions. A more sophisticated, but nevertheless practical, exercise would involve the use of a map and a scale of miles; students could compute the distance between two cities, and then, using the cost per gallon of gasoline and the miles per gallon rates of a particular car model, calculate the cost of a round trip between cities, allowing for portions of travel on highways and through city streets.

Students are certain to gain confidence when they come to recognize how much more control over their lives command of this basic skill can enable them to have. Another important value to be yielded by the mathematics skills section of the reentry curriculum is the fun of it. Whenever possible, games and puzzles should be included in the class work, and students should be encouraged to create their own games or search for problems with which to challenge each other.

THE LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULUM

Rationale:
The language arts curriculum was designed to address the language anxiety of participants, who, inhibited by the disadvantaged socialization of their sex and class, tend to doubt the validity of their own thoughts, keep silent in the presence of others, do not question or dispute the statements of people in authority, but retreat or withdraw rather than express differences openly. To deal with this language anxiety, the language arts curriculum should be approached as a unit, with each lesson involving reading critically, relating new information to previous information or to life experience, talking and listening, and reflecting and writing. These purposes are probably best served by using short essays as the basis for a comprehensive exercise because essays can be read, analyzed, and then used as models for writing. Short poems are useful for exploring levels of meaning, for understanding the affective use of language; they can also be useful as a basis for class discussion, but are not useful in a reentry course curriculum as models for writing because they lend themselves to the indulgence of moods and the exploring of feelings, but not to the organization of ideas and the development of the craft of sentence structure and paragraph composition that are necessary in college writing. Short stories, plays, and exerpts from novels are generally not useful in a reentry language arts curriculum because they cannot be read and comprehended in a short period of time, and while they make for interesting class discussions, they are not useful models for writing.

Structure:

1. Grammar and Usage. Topics should be covered in a descending order of importance, beginning with fragments and run-on sentences. Students often express a desire for "lots of grammar," which is often a way of asking for structure and an end to ambiguity. However, our experience has shown that grammar and usage are best dealt with in the context of writing, and not as a separate entity, except, here, as a warm-up exercise lasting for ten minutes at the beginning of the lesson. Short out-of-class "drill" assignments may be useful, but a concise, portable text as a reference work is essential. William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White's The Elements of Style, third edition (New York: Macmillan, 1979), is perhaps the best presently available.

2. Reading. It is advisable to use short selections that can be read in class in ten minutes. Essays on current topics, such as those written by William Safire, Ellen Goodman, or contributors to the "Hers" column of The New York Times have been found to be useful. It is generally a good idea to avoid humorous essayists, often best appreciated by teachers who may find themselves laughing alone. The teacher's role in designing the questions to enforce the comprehension of the reading selection is extremely important, for not only should unfamiliar words, main ideas, and significant details be made known, but readers must be able to deal as well with the conclusions demanded, if not directly stated, by the reading selection. This skill is generally much needed by reentry participants, who have not usually been made to deal with more than one level of meaning in their previous educational experience.

3. Analysis and Discussion. The role of the teacher is important in overcoming passivity in learners, and assisting them to move from understanding specific facts to applying general principles. Listening is a skill the reentry participants need to acquire; therefore, the teacher must make sure that learners are listening to other participants, and not using the in-class comments of one person as a cue for sharing information privately with a classmate. One way of achieving this goal is to ask specific participants whether they agree or disagree with the statement of a classmate. Each participant should understand that she will be expected to express an opinion, and might therefore be motivated to prepare her ideas prior to the class. Each participant should also understand that dialog with the class is important for her own intellectual growth, for she will strengthen her ideas in the process of expressing and defending them. The reentry teacher needs to be skillful in keeping differences of opinion from becoming personal differences, and students should be asked to make positive evaluations of classmates' responses as well as negative ones. The reentry teacher must also exercise leadership in preventing one or a few students from dominating the discussion. Neither should the discussion be allowed to become merely anecdotal; students who wish to share information about themselves should be challenged to relate their experience to the thesis of the selection or the theme of the discussion.

4. Writing. In a language arts segment of one hour, at least twenty minutes might be devoted to writing. In the case of an essay, students can be asked to respond pro or con to the writer's thesis, with options provided for students who do not wish to do the assignment. However, no student should be allowed not to do a writing assignment. Written feedback from the teacher is essential for the students, who should be encouraged to do additional writing out of class, such as keeping a journal.

5. English-as-a-second-language.

For English-as-a-second-language learners, the reentry curriculum may consist entirely of language arts, with the period of instruction given over to English conversation in areas of basic concern to the learners. One of the Project's greatest successes was providing a reentry participant with enough command of English to persuade her union to file a grievance on her behalf against her employer. With ESL, as with other sections of the reentry course, the Project tried to involve as teachers and counselors persons who were members of the same ethnic group as the participants. This policy was generally successful; however, Soviet immigrants objected strenuously when a teacher who was herself a Soviet immigrant was hired to replace a popular American-born teacher. This experience underscores the need for designers of reentry programs to be sensitive to the expectations of various constituencies and flexible in curricular offerings.

LIFE PLANNING SKILLS CURRICULUM

Introduction

The Life Planning Skills Curriculum is focused on those skills needed for successful planning and decision-making in any area of one's life. Because of the particular emphasis in reentry or plans for return to school, we suggest that illustrative examples and exercises be chosen for this area primarily.

Goals

We hope that through this program students will increase their skills and abilities in the following:

1. awareness of self: activities, values, circumstances, goals;

2. evaluation of activities, values, circumstances, goals, in terms of:

   likes and dislikes
   importance
   practical value
   skill levels
   future consequences

3. decision making skills:
   a. generating alternatives (brainstorming), not closing off options too soon;
   b. projecting probable consequences;
   c. evaluating both activities and their consequences, balancing advantages and disadvantages;
   d. making a choice, risk-taking;

4. ability to describe probable future situations.

The curriculum components described in the next section are designed to lead toward these goals.

Exercises

1. Life Space Drawing

   This is an exercise given with quite general instructions to "draw a picture or diagram which represents your life." The women are likely to respond very differently and can learn from comparing how they and others represent their lives; e.g., by how their time is divided, what is important to them, what they like or dislike; whether they cram themselves into corners while what they do for others is large and central, etc.

LIFE PLANNING SKILLS CURRICULUM

Exercises

In discussing these drawings in the class or in small groups, the women should be alerted to notice especially: a) what they leave out, and b) what they emphasize and why.

Suggested format for the Life Space Drawing: Give about 15-20 minutes for the women to make their drawing and about 40 minutes for an initial discussion of the drawings. It may be helpful to ask the women to break down into groups of 3-4 to talk about their drawings for this session. At the end of the hour the teachers should hold onto the drawings so that they are sure to be at class the following week. The second week discussion can be continued and the women encouraged to add to or change their drawings based on what they have learned about themselves and their lives since the first discussion.

2. Evaluation

a. Use the Life Space Drawings to help the women evaluate what they like and dislike in their lives, how important things are to them, etc.

Suggested format: Indicate on the life space drawing which things you like and which things you don't like. Then make a list of things that you have done at any point in your life, whether it was important or trivial:

1) that you liked
2) that you disliked.

As a result of the Vocational Planning questionnaire we have discovered that our students often do not know how to evaluate their experiences and activities. When asked to list what they like doing, they tend to restrict their responses to obviously job related activities and do not have experience evaluating non-job related activities or analyzing those activities for components that can be related to jobs. Furthermore, when asked to list activities they do not like, they often respond with things they regret not having done, things they are down on themselves for not doing, rather than activities they have done which they simply did not enjoy doing. Often, they will deny ever having done anything they disliked, possibly out of some sense that it is not appropriate to complain about tasks they feel they must do but shouldn't dislike; for example, housework.

b. Use the Life Space Drawings to help women identify areas where they wish to make changes in their lives. This involves both stating clearly what it is you don't want to happen anymore as well as what you want to have happen in its place. This latter may not be known and the decision making skills component can be used to help discover this information.

LIFE PLANNING SKILLS CURRICULUM

3. Decision-Making Skills

For the decision making skills we suggest using a brainstorming technique. Go through the whole process in the group as a whole first; then the students can go through it themselves individually.

a. Generating Alternatives: Pick one topic which has relevance for many of the women, or at least for some. Have the class think of as many alternatives as they can, no matter how practical or impractical they are. It is important to emphasize that no evaluation is to be done at this stage. All ideas are welcome, no matter how outlandish they seem.

b. Projecting Probable Consequences: When no one has any more ideas to offer, move on to projecting probable consequences for each alternative. List all possible consequences for each alternative and indicate how likely each one is.

c. Evaluation: Go through the list of alternatives and consequences and weigh how desirable each possibility is. This will obviously be an individual process, but doing it as a class may help to illuminate how individuals differ in their evaluations and help them learn to respect these differences; they do not have to agree.

d. Making a Choice: The important point here is that any choice involves risk. Any choice entails both advantages and disadvantages and consequences which may or may not occur. But if there are no "right" choices, then there are also no "wrong" choices either. You may want to come up with alternative reasonable choices from the evaluation and show them how none are all "right" or all "wrong".

The choice stage may be an especially good time to work on overcoming fear of failure. Help them evaluate the likelihood of failure realistically. If the chance of failure is close to zero, you are probably being too cautious. Trying something and failing is at least an indication of willingness to take a risk. It also helps one learn more about oneself. Then you can move on to a somewhat risky (but still not zero risk) alternative. It is important to help them distinguish between failing at something and being a failure as a person.

Going through all four stages with the class as a whole will probably take two sessions. Then for homework, the students could on their own set a problem, generate alternatives, project consequences, evaluate them, and make a choice. Throughout this process it is important to point out that a possible negative consequence does not totally negate an alternative. Forseeing negative consequences; e.g., difficulties in accomplishing a goal, gives one the opportunity to plan so that those problems are eliminated or minimized

LIFE PLANNING SKILLS CURRICULUM

4. Projected Life-Space Drawing[1]

This is an exercise in describing probable future situations. We suggest that you use one situation for everyone: going to school. Ask the women to draw their life-space (as in the first exercise) as it would be if it were next fall and they were enrolled in scho l. The type of school, number of courses, etc., are to be their decision.

As before, analyze the drawings for what is emphasized and what is left out. Discuss what their lives would be like if they were going to school, including both positive and negative consequences.

[1]The use of life space drawings is derived from K. Lewin, "Behavior and Development as a Function of the Total Situation" in L. Carmichael (Ed.) Manual of Child Psychology (New York: Wiley, 1946) 2nd Ed.

SUPPORT SERVICES AND COUNSELING

The original proposal expected individual peer counseling services to provide for all the counseling needs of the Project. This aspect of the program had to be altered almost immediately because the participants were unable to make the commitment of time necessary to complete the Women's Center's program of peer counseling training (and because the participants lost interest in the training as they became aware of the fact that it would not lead eventually to paid employment.) Moreover, it soon became apparent that most participants' counseling needs demanded more expertise than peers could provide. A further consideration was that participants in the reentry course were more comfortable when their counseling needs were addressed outside of the reentry course. This seems to have been due in part to the fact that the reentry courses were in the beginning cycles held at community sites rather than at the college. In this setting, many of the class members were neighbors or otherwise knew each other and a complex already-established set of relationships involving status hierarchies were brought to the classroom and prevented the development of the kind of communication necessary for successful group counseling. Classroom counseling was resisted by the participants on the basis that it was a "frill" inappropriate to a formal learning situation. Getting help in considering options and making decisions about one's life was not considered a professional service by the participants. An even stronger basis for resistance was that classroom counseling meant revealing one's private life to one's neighbors, which was literally the case in the community sites. For all these reasons, by the beginning of the second year, counseling was presented as a separate entity, under the direction of a counseling team. The Project's expanded counseling staff provided a variety of counseling services to participants in the program, the most prominent of which was drop-in counseling.

SUPPORT SERVICES AND COUNSELING

In orientation meetings, the counseling staff defined counseling as a learning experience, a process directed toward a goal, rather than a rap session, or an airing of pent-up feelings. Counseling values continued to be incorporated into the reentry curriculum, however, although counseling was not presented to participants as an explicit component of the course. Having identified the reentry population's counseling needs, the counseling staff made available to participants an array of counseling services. An assertiveness training course, usually running for six sessions, was offered to participants in each cycle of the reentry course. Where absence and lateness became a problem in the course, the directors of counseling instituted a policy of asking each registrant to make a deposit of a small amount of money which was returned if the required standards of promptness and attendance were met. This policy lowered the attrition rate in the course. In response to requests from participants, a series of one day workshops in vocational exploration was offered, but participants failed to register for them. When asked why they had not come forward for a service they had specifically requested, the students responded that they felt they could not learn anything in one day. The staff reflection on the failure of this course was that the population drawn to the reentry program are dependent learners, and are realistic in their perception that they need a longer course; they need much more reinforcement in their learning situation, both in terms of the need for repetition of the material, and the need for the supportive atmosphere which develops in an on-going classroom situation. However, a series of one day writing workshops was well attended, after the policy of requesting a deposit was instituted. The greater success of this workshop can perhaps be attributed to its high level of concreteness and its goal of specific skill acquisition, a value repeatedly expressed by the participants.

The Project's experience demonstrated that if an institution wishes to reach out to groups of learners it has not previously served or who have traditionally been excluded from postsecondary education, support services modeled after the Project's design must be made available to these new learners. But the goal of this support service must be to enable learners to become autonomous and self-actualizing. The Project initially asked for too much self-reliance from participants in the reentry course, declaring them "co-Learners" who could take responsibility for planning their education. The reentry participants proclaimed themselves novices in need of guidance. In the process of adapting the program to meet the expressed needs of the participants, the Project staff assumed roles as experts and providers, rushing to attempt to meet every need without establishing procedures that would enable participants to contribute to their own growth. In a later stage, the Project staff began asking the participants to become more accountable to the Project. Such policies as requiring an interview and pre-testing as a prerequisite for entering the reentry course, prohibiting people from entering the reentry course after the first two sessions, requiring a deposit from participants before they entered the assertiveness training program, produced more self-reliance in participants. This last stage, in which reentry became a process of negotiation between program and participants, produced not only the desired decrease in attrition, but a greater perception on the part of participants of the value of the reentry course in helping them to enter the college successfully.

PROVIDING INFORMATION ABOUT OTHER PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

After the first cycle, the goal of the reentry course was defined more specifically to participants as preparation for college, and the reentry curriculum was modified toward this goal. However, the Project staff were aware after the first year that the reentry course was not in itself sufficient preparation for college. There was evidence that a large number of students who had entered Brooklyn College under the auspices of the program in the earlier stages of the program were encountering academic difficulty or finding themselves unable to pursue a program of academic study because of family commitment or opposition from spouses or partners. The Project staff recognized the need to strengthen the procedure by which people who had completed the reentry course were brought into the college under the Project's sponsorship. Before sponsoring a student, the Project established an interview and evaluation procedure designed to enable the Project to assess the student's level of basic skills and to enable the candidate to assess her ability to undertake an academic program with respect to her life situation. The skills evaluation procedure involved, in addition to the Stanford Advanced Reading Test, the Wide Range Achievement Test-Math, and a writing sample. The evaluation procedure was designed to parallel the components of the CUNY-Wide Assessment Test administered to all incoming freshmen beginning with the Fall, 1978 semester. The Project's tests were an index to the candidate's performance on the CWAT, and the Project staff could advise students if they were likely to be placed in remedial, non-credit math, reading, and writing courses. The Project's operating assumption was that since students coming into Brooklyn College through our program were not likely to have had pre-calculus math, they would need to take remedial math. The Project sponsored its own section of remedial math and through the cooperation of the Mathematics Department was fortunate in having a very able, sympathetic instructor assigned to its course. However, we did not wish to bring students in to the college if they were likely to be placed in a totally remedial program, as this would exhaust their financial aid resources and not even start them on their work toward a degree. If students' reading scores were low and their writing samples showed deficiency, the Project would not sponsor their admission, but directed them to adult education centers.

The interview procedure was based on a registration questionnaire designed to learn who our population was, in terms of age, educational and work experience, and family situation. Students were reminded that state aid was awarded only to full time students. Project staff emphasized the need for a support system if candidates had young children and shared with candidates the information that it was our experience that single heads of households with young children often had too many obstacles to overcome in order to go to college. The Project's purpose in this interview was not to pry--in any event, candidates were not likely to be forthcoming if they felt information would be used against them. The purpose was rather to emphasize to candidates the heavy demands of time and energy that were involved in undertaking an academic program, and to make them aware of how much further difficulty they would encounter if they had young children or if husbands or other family members opposed their educational plans. The Project staff came to believe that we could not emphasize too strongly to candidates the importance of recognizing and developing strategies for dealing with opposition from husbands if it existed, for in our experience, this opposition was a main factor in attrition.

PROVIDING INFORMATION ABOUT OTHER PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Early in our experience with people who sought out our program for assistance, we realized the Project could not meet every one's needs. The Project worked to develop its knowledge of other educational resources, in terms both of what was available and what quality of service was delivered. Over time, the Project was successful in this effort and was able to direct people who could not be well served by the Project to the appropriate educational resource. These resources were often community colleges whose programs could meet the needs of people with specific vocational goals, such as becoming a dental technician or a school secretary. The other usual area of referral was adult education centers to which we directed people who needed assistance in improving their reading or writing skills, or who needed help in obtaining a high school equivalency diploma. It was the Project's policy never to send away anyone who came to us without providing some recommendation addressing their educational goal or need. The Project developed a referral form, directed to the school, college, or agency where were making the referral, and wherever possible, the form was addressed to a particilar individual. The Project referral form identified the person whom we were referring and the reason for the referral. As the Project made referrals, it also received them, and when a candidate identified an agency as the referrer, we sent a form to the referring agency reporting what action we had taken. This outreach and network effort strengthened the program's credibility and support within the wider Brooklyn community.

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE
FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES
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